



Why People Want Power

English

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The desire for power is one of humanity's oldest and most enduring motives. Its roots reach into both history and biology: the instincts to dominate, establish a hierarchy and control resources make power desirable and, to many, necessary. Throughout history, this desire has taken shape in heroes, chiefs and monarchs, figures around whom not only states but entire systems of values have been built.

Yet however enduring this motive may be, changing social conditions keep forcing us to reconsider the reasons for power. Scarce resources, competition and fear of chaos create a need to justify it: why this particular authority, why now, why in this form? This is where culture and upbringing exert their strongest influence. They teach us to see power as a goal, an attainable position, a sign of success. These reasons settle into myths, pass from parents to children and become part of what we are taught.

And still a question arises: what if the history of humanity had never made the pursuit of power necessary? Imagine a world whose social order has no hierarchies, where horizontal ties take the place of vertical ones. Life in such a world would be radically different—perhaps more flexible, perhaps more chaotic, but certainly unlike the life we know. Our understanding of legitimacy would change just as profoundly: if power needed no justification, no explanation, we might see it as natural or, on the contrary, absurd.

Here, a reason becomes what keeps power from turning arbitrary. We want to believe that power has grounds, that it is neither an accident nor a whim nor a mistake. This belief gives us a sense of predictability, moral stability and trust. Without it, power looks like tyranny or chaos, depending on who is looking.

But what if this reason, too, is merely a justification invented after the fact? Then it does not precede power; it accompanies it, like an ornament or an outer shell. Such a realization unsettles our sense of justice: if the reason is an illusion, power itself may prove to be a form of self-deception.

A reason is often used to justify moral superiority. It is more than a logical explanation: it is a claim to truth, to the right to decide what is good and what is bad. Political rhetoric rests on this foundation: 'We have the right because...' Such words carry a force that makes power lasting, transferable and legitimate. Yet sometimes they are only a shell concealing brute force, control and coercion. When we can see through that shell, power loses its magic and becomes a mere mechanism.

If power had no justification, even in the form of a myth, it would be hollow. People would obey only out of fear or habit. As long as some reason remains, however questionable, power can endure. But there is a danger here: when that reason loses its substance, power becomes manipulation. It is sustained by helplessness rather than conviction.

Some researchers believe that fear is the basic reason people seek power. Fear of anarchy, disorder and a world without boundaries drives people towards submission. Power promises safety and stability, even when that stability comes at the cost of freedom. Other motives—envy, charisma, a desire to assert oneself—also play a part. Sometimes power is simply a means of self-protection. Sometimes it is a way to quiet an inner anxiety.

Imagine that power arose from love rather than fear. In such a society, leadership would mean care rather than domination: power as service, not mastery. Is this possible? In theory, yes. In practice, such forms of power are rare and fragile. A desire for power grounded in love must be sustained by the community, not only by the person who holds it.

If power arose from protest, it would seek to overturn the status quo rather than preserve it. Power itself would then express a revolutionary impulse, a constant renewal and a refusal of settled hierarchies. In this setting, it would lose its stabilizing role and become an instrument of change—and, with it, a source of instability.

In reality, however, we encounter a paradox: the more power a person gains, the more often they lose themselves. The existential crisis that comes with gaining control lays bare an inner emptiness. Power, it turns out, does not necessarily bring meaning; it can destroy it. Then a person feels that power is not a summit but an abyss.

The feeling that power is meaningless can arise not only from a personal crisis but also from failures within the system: unsuccessful reforms, corruption, ideological exhaustion. Where power produces no results, it comes to seem ineffectual, a piece of theatre. People lose trust, withdraw and turn away from politics. Power becomes a joke—a farce rather than an instrument.

Imagine a society in which power always seemed full of meaning. Perhaps no philosophy of doubt would have emerged there, no search for other ways of governing. Yet this very doubt drives intellectual and social development. It gives rise to criticism, protest and fresh thought.

If the meaninglessness of power awakens people instead of making them apathetic, a new relationship with power becomes possible. They rethink their involvement, look for ways to participate and demand accountability. But this can also lead to radicalization. A person who seeks meaning through power risks falling into self-deception, using power to fill an inner void.

Such a person may come to believe that only power can make them matter. The lack of meaning does not disappear; titles, influence and subordinates merely conceal it. Behind them often lies an anxious question: ‘What if none of this means anything?’ That anxiety can eat away at the structure from within. Power then grows unstable, and a crisis of legitimacy begins.

Sometimes this takes the form of cultural parody: power becomes an object of ridicule and satire. Rituals that once seemed important turn hollow. When the purpose of power no longer matches its results, its foundations begin to crumble. People stop believing its promises, and power loses its future.

Another important question emerges here: the grounds on which power rests. Without them, power becomes violence. In some cultures, power simply ‘is’, like a force of nature. It needs no explanation. In other settings, especially democratic ones, power without grounds is seen as a threat.

This is why narratives arise: of divine right, of tradition, of a contract between the people and their rulers. Such grounds give power legitimacy. Legal rules codify it, culture protects it and education explains it. Together, they create a sense of justice. People feel they are submitting to a coherent order rather than an arbitrary will.

But what if these grounds are merely a smokescreen? What if they conceal reality instead of reflecting it? Power then becomes manipulation, especially when its justifications change too often—from religion to progress, from progress to security, from security to survival. This endless search for new grounds erodes trust. Power loses its stability.

When those grounds are unclear, a struggle over interpretation begins. Some say power protects them; others say it threatens them. The winner is not whoever is right, but whoever speaks loudest. Institutions break down, populism takes hold and consensus disappears.

If charisma takes the place of solid grounds, power depends on one person. This is dangerous: charisma dies with its bearer, and succession is uncertain. Power becomes a performance. When the performance ends, people are left alone before the void.

Sometimes the foundation is simply habit. 'It has always been this way.' Here lies the strength of tradition, but also its weakness: it leaves no room for renewal. Power stiffens like a mummified body. It continues to exist, but no longer lives.

And yet, for all its fragility, having grounds strengthens the sense of justice. When people understand and share the reason power exists, they accept it even in difficult times. Without that, only fear remains. Or indifference. Or revolt.

Power inevitably appears wherever people need to coordinate their behaviour, manage resources, resolve conflicts and maintain order. It can be found in every form of organized interaction, from ancient tribal communities to modern states, from families to multinational corporations and even online communities. In each setting, it takes on a distinct form that reflects the society's stage of development, its needs and its cultural outlook.

The absence of power, by contrast, is found where there is either no need for governance or another way of ordering life: equality, autonomy, self-regulation. Such conditions, however, are usually brief or depend on isolation. Historical examples—anarchist communes, non-hierarchical tribes and short-lived utopian experiments—suggest that organized systems without any power at all are rare.

Power becomes possible when certain conditions come together: population density, competition for scarce resources, complex networks of communication, hierarchies or interests that need coordinating. Conversely, it becomes impossible or unstable under conditions of complete autonomy, isolation, a cultural rejection of control or an absence of any need to structure interactions. In such settings, power either fails to arise or quickly falls apart.

Examining the environment in which power takes shape helps us understand what strengthens or weakens it. Crises, conflicts, stark inequality, hierarchies and social divisions favour power. Under these conditions, it is seen as a means of survival and a guarantee of order. Open societies, horizontal structures, strong trust and developed institutions of self-government are less hospitable to it. They reduce the need for mechanisms of power and can give rise to other ways of regulating social life.

The boundaries of power are more than political and administrative lines. They are also mental, cultural and symbolic barriers. They appear in people's ideas about how far institutions may reach, in legal limits, and in myths and rituals that restrain power or give it a special status. These boundaries are not always visible, but they define what power may do and what it can do within a

particular culture.

Different regions and cultures give power different forms. In some societies, it is embodied in a person and tied to a leader's charisma; in others, it is institutional and impersonal. Power may be religious, secular, military, civil or digital. Each form responds to a region's particular historical, cultural and climatic conditions. Geography and culture act as a filter: they may strengthen power, giving it stability and legitimacy, or make it fragile and prone to crisis.

How power interacts with other forces is one of the clearest signs of how real and effective it is. Power never exists in isolation: it is bound up with law, capital, information, violence, religion and technology. These may strengthen its reach or limit it. The media, for instance, can speak on power's behalf or criticize it; the army can sustain a regime or bring about a coup.

There are organized groups in which power either plays the central role or forms one part of a larger whole. They include state institutions, corporations, ideological movements, religious organizations, educational bodies and elite circles. Each can act in relation to power as an agent, a bearer or an opponent. Power itself also belongs to a broader family of governing and regulating forces, alongside norms, sanctions, laws and myths.

The groups with which power interacts are themselves divided by function, rank and institutional position. Within them, roles emerge: ruler, intermediary, critic, mouthpiece, ally, opponent. Each role shapes both the structure of power and the way it operates. Power's own place in a group depends on how it is understood—as a source of order, a means of oppression or something to be manipulated.

These roles, in turn, shape the relationships between power and other forces. Those relationships can take many forms: cooperation, competition, conflict, symbiosis, avoidance, exploitation. Power may coerce, persuade, manipulate or regulate. Its manner depends on its cultural setting, ideological foundations and legitimacy.

Social groups—the public, elites, the army, religious institutions and the business community—play a central part in the dynamics of power. They can both exercise power and receive its effects. Some cultures make power sacred; others strip it of that status. The wish to preserve or destroy it depends on how benefits and symbolic capital are distributed, and on the narratives that sustain it.

Power arises from the need to coordinate, protect, distribute resources and regulate behaviour. These causes may come from outside—threats, conflicts, natural disasters—or from within, through the need to bring order to life. Power is society's response to the challenge of complexity.

The consequences of power cut both ways. It can provide stability and make development possible, but it can also bring oppression, stagnation and distortion. It reaches every level of life, from the distribution of goods to control over thought. Its functions, both open and hidden, include protection, coordination, violence, manipulation and the imposition of meaning.

There are other reasons power takes shape: cultural preferences, myths, technological possibilities, chance and charisma. Each can provide the foundation for a distinctive regime.

If power offered no protection, it would be seen as a parasite. If nothing made it legitimate, it would face constant challenge. If it had no consequences, it would be a fiction rather than a real phenomenon.

Power, then, is more than a mechanism of government. It is a layered, changing force that creates meaning, shaping not only the social order but the very structure of knowledge, identity and action. It is woven into time and space, into causes, social relations, culture and philosophy. Each cascade analysis reveals power as a web of interactions, differences, histories and symbols, continually rearranged by its context, rather than a fixed essence.